

CTC NEWSLETTER

March
2005



Ace Behavioral Interviews By Telling Powerful Stories

- Arlene S. Hirsch, *CareerJournal.com*,
reprinted with permission of *The Wall Street Journal*

TELLING YOUR STORY

*Choose your examples
strategically*

- *what questions might the employer ask?*
- *What experiences have I had that could illustrate my answer and make me look good?*

Organize your examples

- *Set the scene for your example*
- *Problem + Action = Results*
- *Emphasize underlying themes in your examples*

Practice telling your examples and your transition story

- *Input from others is invaluable*
- *Telling your story helps to motivate you!*

Behavior-based interviews have been around for more than a decade, but if you aren't prepared for them, they can throw you for a loop. You know that you're in a behavior-based interview when most of the questions begin with statements like, "Tell me about a time when..." and "Describe a situation where...."

The premise behind behavior-based interview questions is that past performance is the best predictor of future success. To determine past performance, candidates are asked to provide specific examples that show interviewers whether they have key skills and experiences needed in the job. Usually, these questions are framed around the specific job description.

Michael Rosenband, president of jobgob! LLC, a career-



"The first glimpse of a man's character is in the words he speaks, the stories he tells, and how he presents himself."

- Mac Soddoris,
Senior Counselor,
CDRC, U.S. Dept. of State

management firm in Chicago, coaches job hunters on how to prepare for these interviews. The key, he says, is to identify the examples that you want to use beforehand and learn to recount them as stories so that you don't get caught flat-footed during the interview.

Mr. Rosenband remembers many awkward moments with candidates who were

unprepared for these kinds of questions when he was vice president of marketing and business development for Morgan Marshall Industries, a retail-store-fixtures maker in Chicago Heights, Ill. "You could tell that they hadn't done their homework," he says. "Their responses were all over the map."

Think Strategically

Unlike traditional interviews, a behavioral interview usually requires

you to provide specific examples of how you acted in the past, instead of sharing your opinion or thoughts. To prepare effectively, think about what you've done or experienced that most closely relates to what your potential employer needs to be successful.

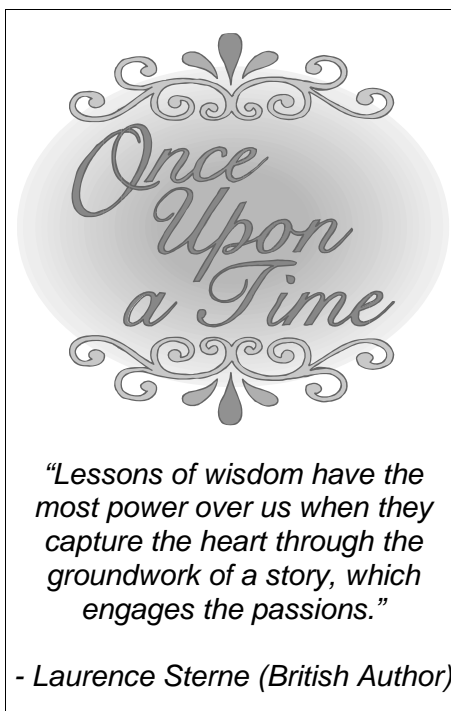
It helps to get as much insight as possible into what the employer is seeking. "Review the job description to figure out what the employer is looking for so that you're able to relay skills and experiences that are on-point," says Mr. Rosenband.

When it comes to due diligence surrounding job interviews, Mike Lorelli, chief executive officer of Latex International in Shelton, Conn., is a maestro. Last July, the 52-year-old Mr. Lorelli landed his new CEO role less than a month after he helped negotiate the sale of his former employer.

To prepare for job interviews, Mr. Lorelli first spends about 20 to 40 hours researching a company. He studies its Internet site and re-plays audio interviews or Web casts that are often available on sites of publicly traded companies.

"Read the last four or five questions and listen to the speeches given by senior managers," says Mr. Lorelli. "Listen to how people speak. It will give you a good sense for tone, cast and character of a company."

He also reviews an employer's stock prospectus and its Form 10-K report for facts about top-management compensation, stock options, bonuses and employment contracts. "Read everything you can, even the foot-



notes," he advises. Hoovers.com and other Web sites that profile companies also can provide information about potential employers.

This kind of targeted information allows you to home in on what a company is looking for, eliminate extraneous anecdotes and position yourself as a very focused candidate who understands an employer's needs and priorities.

Organizing Your Stories

Once you know what examples to use, how should you organize them? One way is to

apply a Problem (or Situation)-Action-Result formula (PAR), says Kenneth Widelka, acting general manager of Pearson Reid London House, a Chicago-based human-resources services provider. When interviewing candidates, Mr. Widelka always asks them to provide examples of how they've used certain strengths. He analyzes the stories based on the PAR format, as follows:

1. Problem

Start by describing the problem or situation that you faced.

"Because of the escalating price of ingredients in our products, we needed to rethink our production, pricing and marketing strategies and processes."

2. Action

Describe the action that you took.

"I took a leadership role in meeting with the purchasing, production and marketing managers - both individually and collectively -- to determine whether we needed to revise our product formulas, develop new brands and open up new channels of distribution."

3. Result

Describe the results.

"When we discovered that our product was too expensive for its original target market, I was able to work with the purchasing manager on a strategy to identify, solicit and negotiate less expensive contracts. I also worked closely with the marketing manager and the marketing team to reposition our product for a more upscale clientele. This resulted in a \$200,000 decrease in expenses and \$250,000 increase in net revenues."

she says.

Interviewers usually frame their questions around the traits or skills deemed essential for success in the position or organization. At Morgan Marshall, Mr. Rosenband prepared to conduct interviews by developing a checklist of behavioral questions. "I was looking for two primary things: cultural fit and ability to perform the job," he says.

To answer the question of cultural fit, he looked for a "can-do attitude." Could the candidates execute? Or did they get mired in the details?

Don't Skimp on the Problem

Too many candidates jump into a description of their actions without fully describing the problem or situation, says Mr. Widelka. This makes it seem as though they don't understand the larger business picture or appreciate how their actions contribute to the firm's business goals and strategy.

"Candidates need to spend as much time describing the situation or problem as they do describing their own actions," he says. "Some people get so caught up in the description of their activities that they never even get to the results."

When you advance to your actions, always recount your most significant accomplishments or contributions, advises Laurie Anderson, an organizational psychologist in Oak Park, Ill. "And talk about why it was so challenging," she says. "If it didn't get hard, it wasn't a real accomplishment."

She emphasizes the importance of recounting your behavior as a story. "Your actions always speak louder than your words. Don't tell me who you are; tell me what you did,"



"A story, in which native humour reigns, is often useful, always entertains"

*- William Cowper
In "Conversation"*

Fine-Tuning Your Delivery

How you tell your stories will say as much about your performance as what you tell. If you can't tell a story comfortably, you probably shouldn't be telling it at all. It's important to know why you are using a particular example and what you want it to demonstrate. Don't recount a story that lacks a happy ending or portrays you as ineffective.

One information-technology professional wanted to demonstrate "execution skills" during a behavioral interview. But when describing how he implemented certain financial software programs and processes, he got so bogged down in the details about the implementation that he never described the results. Leaving out the results is like leaving out the punch line to a joke. The listener won't appreciate the value of the story.

It's impossible to anticipate every question, so knowing how to think on your feet is important. Give thorough forethought to the stories (or examples) you want to relate and then rehearse until you can tell them flawlessly. "The best stories are those you can

tell with energy, enthusiasm and confidence," says Mr. Rosenband.

Stick to the Positive

Although you may be understandably anxious when confronted with a behavioral interview, don't sabotage yourself by being negative. When you say negative things about yourself or anyone else, you introduce an element of hostility into the interview. By putting a positive spin on your answers, you keep the tone of the interview positive.

After you tell your story, ask for feedback. Is this the kind of information that the interviewer was looking for? Or would they like you to give a different example? Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" or "nothing comes to mind" when you're asked a question. You can't invent experiences (positive or negative) that you don't have.

Interviewees also can use stories to demonstrate character traits. When a candidate for a job as a high-school football coach was asked about his dedication and commitment, he described a hectic two days when he took an injured player to the hospital and waited in the emergency room until nearly 2 a.m. for the player to be released. After leaving the hospital he took the player home, dropped off the next week's game film to another coach, picked up two other players from their homes and drove them to their SAT exams. During the SAT exam, he watched and analyzed a game film and returned the film to someone more than an hour away before picking up and taking the players home.

He got the job.



-- Ms. Hirsch is a career counselor in Chicago, who has written several books on career issues, including "How to Be Happy at Work" (JIST, 2003) and "Job Search and Career Checklists: 101 Proven Time-Saving Checklists to Organize and Plan Your Career Search," (JIST, 2005).

EDITOR'S NOTES

"He is at that stage when people go back to the past to create a narrative of their life: What is the significance of one person's story? This kind of life review and reevaluation is a critical process in late adulthood. It shapes a person's legacy. It identifies themes that hold together different, sometimes conflicting chapters in the past. It explains how someone got from there to here." (by Abigail Trafford in her "My Time" column in The Washington Post on 11 January 2005.)



When I read those lines recently, they made me think of you all who are transitioning from one chapter in your life to new ones. Many of you had to weed through a career's worth of files, records, photos, and other miscellanies when you retired. Some of you united all of your household effects for the first time in decades.

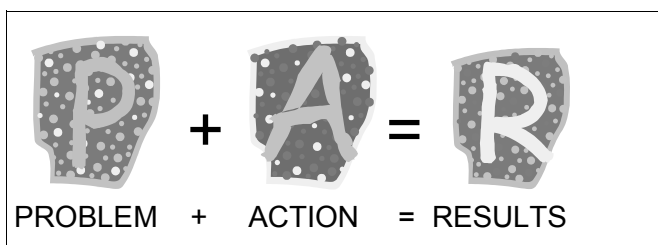
In the Career Transition Center we are always urging our clients involved in job search to review their careers, looking for patterns - where you were happy at work and what skills you were using at the time, where you excelled and were rewarded for that excellence, where you were miserable on the job and what skills you were using, etc.-- so that, as DeWitt Jones would say, you can put yourself at the "place of most potential."

"Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."

- Hannah Arendt



When our Job Search Program clients draft their accomplishment statements for their resumes, we recommend the use of the formula “Problem → Action → Results” — which is the basic structure of many stories. Well known Career Counselor Susan Ireland even includes “Know your PARs” in her interview preparation checklist. She says, “Practice telling at least three stories that illustrate your strengths in a PAR format ... Prepare to sprinkle them throughout the interview in response to relevant questions. Your stories can make the difference between a ho-hum and striking answer.” (www.susanireland.com/interviewwork) One of our clients used to practice these stories on his cats who he found to be a very critical and discerning audience!



In the JSP we provide guidance on interviewing and networking, encouraging our clients to practice “The Dirty Dozen” interview questions as well as a “30 Second Summary.” When Mac Saddoris, our wonderful colleague in the State Department Career Development Resource Center, speaks so eloquently to our JSP clients, he advocates the idea of “talking with an end in mind” while networking and interviewing.

And, finally, we encourage our clients to document this particular professional chapter of your life with diaries, oral histories, scrapbooks, etc., so that you can share those memories with your family and friends now, and, years later, you can read and remember those adventures while you are rocking on the porch of the old folks' home.

One concept that recurs throughout our con-

sultations is that of storytelling.

Steve Denning (www.stevedenning.com), an author of several books on the uses of storytelling in business, also writes that an effective business story has a sympathetic protagonist (you in your interviewing and networking), a problem, and a successful resolution. He cautions that good stories must be evocative, transporting, persuasive, memorable, and useful.

BoomerCareer.com (www.boomercareer.com) has a good article entitled “Tell Your Story, Get That Job!” in which Denise Lang discusses the idea of Behavior Event Interviewing. “Sometimes called ‘selection interviewing,’ BEI’s strategy focuses on getting an interviewee to relate specific actions, statements, thoughts and feelings that occurred during an important event — usually work-related, but not necessarily so. The spirit of the interview is to capture how the interview subject got the job done, thus demonstrating initiative, creative thinking, organizational ability, passion, follow-through and many other characteristics that will lead the interviewer to believe this person would be a great fit for the available job.” This short article offers some helpful hints on choosing and pitching your stories in an interview.

There’s another article on this type of interviewing that is well worth reading in The Chronicle of Higher Education (02-15-05) — “The Fourth Factor for Hiring” by M. Mark Wasicsko. It offers good insight into why interviewers ask these sorts of questions.

The Quintessential Careers website (www.quintcareers.com) recommends a “Job Interview Prep Sheet” by Louise Giordano that includes a column for “Your Stories.” Ms.

“Story is the vehicle we use to make sense of our lives in a world that often defies logic.”

- Jim Trelease

Giordano stresses that, "The stories are what really count in an interview. They tell your story; they sell you to the interviewer, and they provide rich material for illustrating your ability to do the job. They also suggest follow-up questions that you can answer because you are prepared!"

When you are choosing the stories that illustrate your strengths and abilities, it is very important to remember Mac's advice about "talking with an end in mind." First, determine your focus:

- "What kind of connection do we desire and what outcomes do we expect?"
- How do we want to be perceived and what do we want to be perceived to stand for?
- What are the interests, expertise, and accomplishments we want them to remember?"

Then, make sure that each story:

- shows your values and priorities — as Mac puts it, "what you stand for."
- shows how you use your knowledge, experience, passion, values.
- spotlights your expertise in that area.

There is a very good article in the January 2005 Harvard Business Review called "What's Your Story?" by Herminia Ibarra and Kent Lineback (pp. 64-71). HBR describes the article this way: "If you're changing professional direction, narrative is the way to give shape and meaning to the bare-bones facts of your career. With a well-told story, you can convince others — and reassure yourself — that your plans for the future make sense." The article is well worth your time to read. (The HBR is pretty expensive at your newsstand, so you may want to read it at the library.)

If all this talk of storytelling has sparked your interest in the subject, there are lots of resources available — feline feedback is not your only avenue!

- Aaron Shepard has "A Guide to Storytelling" tutorial on his website (www.aaronship.com).
- Steve Denning has written several books on storytelling in business: Squirrel Inc: A Fable of Leadership Through Storytelling, Storytelling in Organizations, The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations.
- Storyteller, Storyteacher by Marni Gillard is advertised not just for teachers but for all people who want to learn how to share their stories.

The Writer's Center (www.writer.org) in Bethesda, Maryland, is an organization that promotes the "creation, distribution, and enjoyment of literature and the graphic arts."

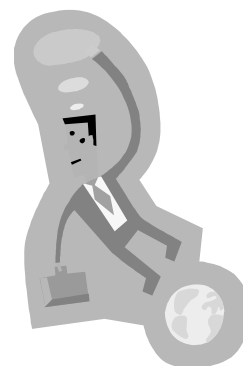
They offer a wide variety of workshops taught by some impressive instructors for reasonable fees — "Writing from Memory: Developing Fiction from Your Own Experiences" and "Writing From Life" are two of their courses.

The Smithsonian Resident Associate Program is offering a seminar on "Storytelling for Organizational Success" on April 22 in Washington, D.C. For more information, go to www.si.edu.

The National Storytelling Network has its own website (www.storynet.org). And, if you are **really** serious, East Tennessee State University even offers a Master's Degree in Storytelling!

"Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts."

- Salman Rushdie



JOB LEADS



Foreign Service and Civil Service retirees of the State Department should keep their eyes out for announcements about innovative ways for staying engaged with the Department. A full package of information will be made available on Foreign Affairs Day, which this year will be on Friday, May 6.

All active duty and retired employees are valuable resources that constitute the Department's Diplomatic Readiness Reserve. Secretary Rice has stressed the importance of this reserve to the Department's current transformational diplomacy mission.

All retirees who are interested in participating in Department activities after retirement, or at least maintaining direct contact, will soon have simple and innovative ways to convey that interest. The Director General will seek your expression of interest in three areas:

- Receiving Department news and information updates via personal e-mail addresses;
- Engaging in part-time, temporary work in the Department and overseas via the existing "While Actually Engaged" or WAE hiring system; and
- Participating in the Department's "Standby Response Corps."

The third opportunity is centered around the Department's new Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). S/CRS is developing a "Response Corps" of active duty State Department employees and retirees to be available to deploy as first responders to undertake reconstruction and stabilization (R+S) efforts crucial to starting a transition to peace, democracy and a market economy in fragile, failing and failed states. Active duty employees will constitute the "Active Re-

sponse Corps;" retirees will be part of a "Standby Response Corps" of second responders. The Active and Standby Corps will train and exercise together, augment task force staff or regional and functional bureaus, and reinforce ongoing R+S missions.

The Department is preparing to launch a new, interactive website for both Department annuitants and employees preparing to retire. Annuitants will access the WAE and Response Corps information through the new website. Annuitants will also be able to receive annuity pay statements on-line. In addition to many other features, all forms and reports will be available.

The Department will communicate directly with Annuitants about accessing the new website and the other new programs.

02/14/2005:Approved:DGHR:RWhiteside

"Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact."

- Robert McKee



ATTENTION JSP GRADS!

The next CTC Job Fair will be held on March 29, 2005 from 1 to 4 pm in the Field House at the Shultz Center.

There will be Follow-Up Meetings with the March JSP clients on April 12 and 26 in Room E-2118 from 10 to 12 noon. All graduates are welcome to attend. Come and share your wisdom!



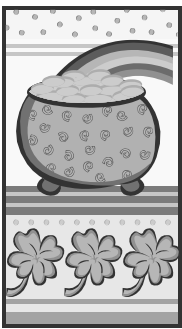
"The story was the bushman's most sacred possession. These people knew what we do not; that without a story you have not got a nation, or culture, or civilization. Without a story of your own, you haven't got a life of your own."

- Laurens Van der Post



"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. "

- Charles Dickens in David Copperfield



*Wishing you
"the luck of the Irish"
in your job search
this month!*



CTC NEWSLETTER

FSI/TC/CTC

U.S. Department of State

Washington, D.C.

20522-4201

Editor: Amy Pitts

Telephone: 703-302-7412

Facsimile: 703-302-7416

E-mail: pittsa@state.gov